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STATE FOR NEA, NEA/PPD, PASS TO DOL-ILAB; LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: BEGINNING THE FIGHT OVER PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

REF: A. AMMAN 7979

1B. AMMAN 2251

Classified By: DCM Daniel Rubinstein, Reasons 1.4 (B) & (D)

11. (C) Summary: Deputy PM Marwan Muasher, chairman of the Royal Commission for the National Agenda (the centerpiece of King Abdullah's reform efforts), recently announced that the commission's report will include a recommendation that membership in the Jordan Press Association (JPA) become voluntary instead of mandatory. The current system of mandatory membership strengthens the unrepresentative leadership of the association and allows them to influence Jordanian media. The JPA's reaction to this reform-oriented proposal was predictably shrill; Jordan's other professional associations, suspecting they may be next, joined in denouncing the proposal. Ominously for reform advocates, the leaders of both houses of parliament also denounced the proposal. This conflict may be indicative of likely fights over liberalization that will arise in the coming months, as Jordanian decision-makers consider the draft National Agenda reforms. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) NOTE: Jordan's professional associations currently wield considerable influence in their fields, due largely to laws that make dues-paying membership mandatory for journalists, lawyers, doctors, engineers, and others. Anyone wishing to officially practice one of these professions must be officially recognized in his or her chosen field, and that official recognition flows from membership in the relevant association. Any editor-in-chief of a paper, for example, must be an officially recognized journalist, and therefore a member of the JPA. Through housing plans, scholarship funds, and peer pressure, these associations also command the loyalty of rank-and-file members, particularly junior professionals. Senior journalists and editors complain that the JPA's leaders are chosen through opaque processes (including faxes to editors with recommended candidates for JPA positions from Jordanian security services) and that they do not pay enough attention to serious professional concerns. Association leaders are also rumored to report on members to the security services, and to benefit from the services, support in return. END NOTE.

13. (C) These professional associations have long been reliably anti-American, anti-Israel, anti-normalization, and anti-reform (ref B). Internal regulations are biased against those who have worked outside of Jordan, even those who have worked for highly respected international news agencies. The associations set limits to official interaction between association members and international organizations; contacts with foreign (non-Arab or non-UN) organizations are discouraged. For example, the JPA, like other professional associations, has boycotted meetings with official Americans since its foundation in the 1950s. After numerous heated debates, the JPA's president and executive committee convinced the membership to allow them to meet with the new PAO soon after his arrival this July. Following this courtesy call, other members of the board publicly and angrily denounced the meeting as a step toward allowing "foreign capitalist normalizers" to control Jordan's media. This reflects what the JPA sees as its main role, as described at the Global Forum for Media Development (October 1 ) 3, 2005), which is to protect Jordanian readers and journalists from the excesses and irresponsibility of nefarious capitalist-controlled foreign forces. An influential journalist opposed to the JPA speaking at the GFMD summed it up best by referring to "paranoid Soviet-style control."

14. (C) The JPA is fighting hard to maintain obligatory membership as a method of controlling journalism in Jordan, and of maintaining its own influence. DPM Muasher's statement that the National Agenda report will recommend ending obligatory membership in the JPA triggered immediate and shrill reactions. (Ref A provides a preview of other expected National Agenda recommendations.) JPA organized a peaceful demonstration in front of the Prime Ministry which (not surprisingly) got significant media coverage. The JPA has also engineered public statements of support by sympathetic legislators, including the heads of both houses

of Parliament. At the same time, in a potentially (and uncharacteristically) positive move, association leaders publicly announced the formation of a committee to update and reform internal regulations. This committee plans to allow journalists who have worked overseas for major international media to count that experience toward establishing professional journalist status in Jordan ) a small step toward openness to outside influences.

15. (C) Editorialists and senior journalists who oppose the JPA and obligatory membership argue that such reforms should have taken place years ago. They say they have little or nothing to show from the JPA over the past fifty years. These senior professionals - supported by reformers in the government and by international advocates for a free and independent press - argue that obligatory membership in professional associations such as the JPA should be a thing of the past, that it impinges on freedom of association, and that it hinders the full development of the media in Jordan. They decry the JPA's opaque and complicated membership rules, which severely limit those who can be officially recognized as journalists. Local International Labor Organization Representative Rashid Khedim, told PolOff this is an issue of freedom of association; membership in any trade or professional union should be optional. ILO is hailing the royal commission's stand against obligatory membership in the JPA. International media rights groups present at the GFMD also made impassioned pleas for the JPA not to oppose this proposed reform, noting how unexpected and unwelcome it was to hear journalists arguing against a government's efforts to remove controls over journalists.

16. (C) Comment: However the JPA battle eventually ends, this recommendation is considered a shot across the bow of all the professional associations. Muasher denies that the National Agenda commission or the government has any plan to repeal laws requiring membership in the other professional associations. However, it is no secret that the Palace views the associations as an obstacle to reform; ending obligatory membership would weaken these critics of GOJ reform efforts (and foreign policy) considerably. As senior editorialist Ibrahim Gharaybed wrote in the independent and influential daily Al-Ghad, the end of obligatory membership in the JPA "constitutes an opportunity for the government to stand up to the other associations and cancel obligatory membership in those as well. The Jordan Press Association was first in line because it is the weakest." Leaders of other professional associations and their anti-reform allies understand this clearly, and are mobilizing to fight the change. END COMMENT.

HALE